

THE ARTS OF LEADING

EDITED BY
EDWARD BROOKS
AND **MICHAEL LAMB**

PERSPECTIVES
FROM THE HUMANITIES
AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

FOREWORD BY
ELLEKE BOEHMER

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Just Leadership in Early Islam

The Teachings and Practice of Imam Ali

Tahera Qutbuddin

According to Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 CE)—the first imam after the Prophet Muhammad according to the Shia, the fourth caliph according to the Sunnis, and one of the most revered leaders in Islam—true leadership is contingent on a leader’s justice. Although political acumen, military strategy, and administrative skills are also crucial to the success of an individual’s leadership, the most important qualification by far is the virtue of justice. Luminaries across human history have deemed justice a cornerstone of leadership, but there are many brands of justice. What is Imam Ali’s understanding of just leadership? As argued in broad strokes in this chapter, a just leader for Ali is one who possesses a composite of several qualities. A just leader is not simply one who is fair and equitable to all his subjects. That is only the beginning. A just leader also possesses wisdom, shows compassion to the weak, shuns corruption, and promotes pluralism. Most importantly, a just leader is at all times conscious of their accountability to God.¹

ALI IBN ABI TALIB: EXEMPLAR OF JUST LEADERSHIP

Ali was the cousin, ward, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the first male to accept Islam.² The Shia believe him to be the prophet’s direct successor in both his spiritual and temporal roles, while Sunnis regard him as the fourth and last “Rightly Guided Caliph.” Both Shia and Sunni Muslims revere him for his deep loyalty to Muhammad, his valorous role in establishing Islam in its nascent stage, and his profound piety, learning, and

justice. They study and cite his sermons, epistles, and aphorisms.³ They laud his wisdom and eloquence.⁴ They recount numerous sayings of the prophet praising him. Famously, they report Muhammad to have said, “I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gateway,” and “You, Ali, are my brother in this world and the next.”⁵ Particularly relevant to the topic at hand, they report that Muhammad said, addressing his companions, “The most just among you is Ali.”⁶

Muhammad died in 632 CE, and Ali took a back seat in government for the next twenty-five years during the caliphates of Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman. In 656 he received the pledge of allegiance from the Muslim community and ruled as caliph until 661, when he was assassinated. Ali’s words, and the anecdotes I quote in this chapter, are from these difficult times. In these four years, Ali was forced to fight three pitched battles against Muslim rebels, many of them prominent figures in the community who disagreed with his strict ideas of justice and equality. He fought the Battle of the Camel in Iraq against three powerful individuals from Medina; the Battle of Siffin against the Damascus governor, Mu’awiyah; and the Battle of Nahrawan against a renegade group from his own army called Kharijites. In the wake of a sham arbitration following the Battle of Siffin, most of his army pulled back, and he spent his last few months persuading them to resume the fight. Meanwhile, Mu’awiyah was going from strength to strength. He already had Syria; he now took over Egypt and sent raiding parties into Arabia and even Iraq, quite close to Ali’s capital, Kufa (a suburb of Najaf in the south of present-day Iraq). Throughout, Ali faced the hard consequences of his ideals. Ultimately, he gave his life for them, killed—while praying in the Kufa mosque at dawn on the nineteenth of Ramadan—by a rebel Kharijite’s poisoned sword.

One of the best characterizations of Ali is given soon after his death. It is remarkable because it is given by one of Ali’s close companions, a man named Dirar al-Nahshali, in the presence of Ali’s arch-enemy Mu’awiyah. Dirar went to Damascus to make some request of Mu’awiyah, who was now caliph. Mu’awiyah, presumably curious about his deceased foe, asked Dirar to describe Ali. Dirar pleaded to be excused from answering. Mu’awiyah insisted and Dirar yielded. This is what Dirar said:

Ali was farsighted and strong. When pronouncing judgment, he was discerning. When commanding, he was just. Knowledge gushed from his person. Wisdom spoke upon his tongue. He shied away from the ornaments of this world, taking solace in the lonely night. He wept copiously in prayer, thought deeply, and turned his hands

one over the other, admonishing himself before admonishing others. He favored simple food and plain clothes. He lived among us as one of us, responding when asked, and answering when questioned. But despite our intimacy, we would approach him with reverent awe, hesitating to call him out for a casual conversation. He respected the pious and was kind to the poor. The powerful did not dare presume upon a favorable ruling and the weak never despaired of his justice.⁷

Flattery of leaders is not uncommon, but here we see something different. Here is a man Mu'awiyah knows to be Ali's staunch supporter praising Ali to Mu'awiyah's face, in what could easily be viewed as a strong rebuke of Mu'awiyah himself. This is a situation in which Mu'awiyah could arbitrarily command Dirar's execution—as he had of some of Ali's other supporters. Yet when Dirar is pressed to describe Ali, he cannot hold back his reverence and love.

In the 1,400 years since, Ali's legacy has lived on. In Ali's own words, "Those who hoard wealth are dead even as they live, whereas the learned remain for as long as the world remains—their persons may be lost, but their teachings live on in the hearts of men."⁸

ALI'S CONCEPT OF JUST LEADERSHIP

Ali's concept of just leadership is rooted in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which sought to end the negative tribalism and unjust practices of the so-called Age of Ignorance.⁹ Justice, especially for the downtrodden, is a refrain in Ali's sermons and the hallmark of his rule. Ali preached justice, and as ruler, he practiced the justice he preached. In addition, he instructed his governors, commanders, and tax collectors to be scrupulously fair—but this is something scholars have already spoken of at length.¹⁰ What I would like to add to that ongoing conversation is that Ali's ideas on justice go beyond simple equality to include a complex cluster of virtues. Drawing on the texts and contexts of his best-known sermons, letters, and sayings, I identify five principal rubrics of his multifaceted vision of justice:

- consciousness of God
- learning, reason, and wisdom

- compassion and gentleness
- integrity and freedom from corruption
- inclusion and pluralism

The large collection of Ali's teachings describes numerous further characteristics of good leadership, which range from the major and general to the smaller and more specific. These characteristics include (without following any particular sequence) the following:

- consultation
- keeping company with good people
- appointing only worthy representatives
- avoidance of nepotism
- being wary of the rich and powerful
- understanding the needs and roles of different categories of people
- tolerance and open-mindedness
- ensuring the prosperity of the populace rather than focusing on revenue-collection
- close supervision of appointees to safeguard against corruption
- special attention to the disadvantaged such as the orphan and the destitute
- efficient governance and hard work
- making yourself available to the people and listening to their complaints
- looking always to make peace, not war
- honoring people of knowledge and virtue
- being watchful against punishing unjustly
- humility, maturity, and deliberation.¹¹

Two further caveats: First, the five main rubrics are in reality intertwined, and sermons cited under one could equally apply to one or more of the others; I separate them only for clarity. Second, just governance has many legal aspects, including criminal, personal, and property law, conflict resolution, and, in the context of early Islam, the law of religious ritual. Although I touch on some of these aspects, these are complex issues, and much more can be said about each.

In a larger study, all these qualities and issues, and more, should be addressed. In this chapter, I highlight five characteristics that showcase Ali's essential framework for just leadership.

CONSCIOUSNESS OF GOD

Justice for Ali is a mandate from God, in step with the Qur'an verse, "God commands you to be just and good."¹² Thus, Ali's worldview anchors a leader's justice in accountability to God, indeed, in consciousness of God. In Ali's thought more broadly, as I have discussed in detail elsewhere, virtue is inextricably linked with piety (Arabic: *taqwā*). Just as godfearing piety is required of all who would be virtuous, virtue is required of all who would be pious; virtue and piety are two sides of the same coin.¹³ For a leader in the community, this combination is all the more urgent. If a leader transgresses, if he oppresses, he will answer to the Divine Judge. Regarding his own governing practice, Ali says: "I would prefer to lie on a bed of three-pronged Sa'dan thorns, to be dragged along the ground in iron fetters, than to meet God and His Messenger on the Day of Resurrection having oppressed any of His servants, or having usurped any part of any person's property."¹⁴

Referencing justice (Arabic: *ʿadl*) in the above declaration by its opposite, namely, the vice of oppression or tyranny (Arabic: *ẓulm*), Ali sets up his ideas of justice in terms of virtue rather than expediency, of principles rather than laws empty of morality. Here again, he can be seen responding to the Qur'an in its warning, "As for the person who oppresses, we shall punish him."¹⁵ Echoing this virtue-based approach to characterizing justice, medieval Arabic lexicons and works of philosophy explicitly define the term "justice" in contrast to "oppression." "Oppression" they define as "putting a thing in a place not its own."¹⁶ "Justice" they define as "the opposite of oppression," thus, "putting a thing in its rightful place."

Connecting justice with consciousness of God, we see Ali declaring that if not for the dictates of piety, he would be more cunning than Mu'awiyah.¹⁷ He also lays out this issue in some detail:

We have entered an age when the public equates betrayal with intelligence, and the ignorant deem those who practice it the most resourceful. What is wrong with them? May God punish them! The man with a discerning heart knows well how to practice cunning, but God's commands and prohibitions prevent him from doing so. He deliberately refrains though he sees the possibility clearly in front of his eyes and has the full capability to implement it. It is the man who has no religion, no scruples to hold him back, who exploits the opportunity.¹⁸

We know from the sources that Mu'awiyah—together with his associate Amr ibn al-As—was proverbial for cunning. He riled up the people of Syria against Ali with a ruse when he raised a bloody shirt on the pulpit declaring that it belonged to “the murdered caliph Uthman” and placed the blame for the murder—falsely—on Ali. When the tide was turning against Mu'awiyah at Siffin, he raised Qur'an pages on spears as a ploy to halt the battle, supposedly turning to the Qur'an as arbiter when he had rejected any arbitration earlier. Whenever he felt the need, he disbursed illegal moneys from the state treasury to buy allegiances. Ali, on the other hand, refused to hand out treasury money, use dishonest tactics in war, or lie ever or at all, in absolute black-and-white terms. For Ali, the end did not justify the means. Pragmatism was not a driver you should heed; piety was. In Ali's terms, what was important at the end of the day was not whether you won the battle. What was important was how you conducted yourself during the battle, how you conducted yourself during your life. The be-all and end-all was responsibility to God.

LEARNING, REASON, AND WISDOM

Ali further underpins his concept of justice with three aspects of human discernment: learning, reason, and wisdom. Among his many sayings promoting these virtues, one lauds learning: “Knowledge is a noble legacy.”¹⁹ Another extols reason: “The best wealth is intelligence and the greatest poverty is foolishness.”²⁰ A third that I particularly like for its openness to new ideas and its Arabian imagery exalts wisdom: “A word of wisdom is the believer's own lost camel—he should seize it where he finds it.”²¹ For those who would lead, Ali presents a combination of all three virtues as an essential prerequisite.

Among Ali's core requirements of a leader is deep learning. In one sermon, he proclaims, “Whoever puts himself forward as a leader among his people should begin by teaching himself before attempting to teach others.”²² In another lengthy sermon, he criticizes the man who, without acquiring sufficient knowledge, sets himself up as judge. After censuring this man's cobbling together of random pieces of information, he says of his ensuing rulings, “The blood of those executed screams from his oppressive rulings and inheritances cry out from his injustice.”²³ Furthermore, Ali vaunts knowledge as a natural path to leadership. In one famous sermon, after setting up a multipoint comparison between knowledge and wealth, he says,

“Knowledge rules, while wealth is ruled over.” Then, pointing to his own breast, he continues, “Truly, abundant knowledge is housed here!”²⁴

So what kind of learning does Ali advocate for a leader? Given that Ali’s teachings are mostly oral materials rather than written books, we should expect that they do not enclose a normative inventory. But we can sift through them to produce a rudimentary list of recommendations. Overall, as shown at the outset of this section, Ali’s idea of learning is open and broad, and he encourages his audience to acquire wisdom from all sources. In particular, he advocates studying the Qur’an, the words of the Prophet Muhammad, the rules of the Islamic sharia, and his own teachings. He also instructs his governors to gain the full context about people among whom they judge and the full history of places they govern.²⁵

Hand-in-hand with learning, Ali advocates reason as the route to leadership. “A man’s reason,” he says, “determines his rank.”²⁶ For Ali, the one implies the other. Learning may be essential for a leader, but rote learning, devoid of critical thinking, is not real learning. Ali emphasizes rationality in all aspects of human existence. In one instance, he says, “Knowledge is of two kinds: innate and acquired; there is no benefit to be had from the acquired in the absence of the innate.”²⁷ In another place he says, “Absorb any hadith you hear with mindful attention, not by rote learning. There are many narrators of knowledge, few its true custodians.”²⁸ Yet elsewhere he says, “A learned man is sometimes killed by ignorance, and his learning fails to come to his aid.”²⁹

In addition to learning and reason, Ali speaks of wisdom—which he presents on some occasions as an aggregate of the two—as an essential part of justice. Indeed, he presents all three collectively as a fundamental element of faith. In one famous sermon, he first lists justice as one of four pillars of faith (the others are forbearance, conviction, and struggle against evil). Then he further parses justice into four supporting columns, of which three are the virtues of discernment that we are concerned with here: knowledge (learning), comprehension (reason), and wisdom; the fourth is restraint. Essentially, Ali makes faith contingent on justice, and justice contingent on comprehension, knowledge, and wisdom. Further along in the sermon, he explains why they are indispensable to justice, saying, “Whoever possesses comprehension understands particulars from the generalities of knowledge. Whoever knows the path of wondrous wisdoms is guided to the repositories of self-control and does not stray.”³⁰ In these lines, Ali presents a hierarchy in which comprehension validates knowledge and wisdom validates comprehension. Wisdom—about which the Qur’an says, “Whoever is given wisdom is given immense good”³¹—emerges in Ali’s sermon as the

full flowering of rationality and learning and the most important support for justice.

In this connection, too, the medieval Arabic lexical tradition bears examining, for it affirms the culture's linking of wisdom, justice, and leadership. The lexicons note that the words denoting "wisdom," "judgment," and "rule"—*ḥikmah*, *ḥukm*, and *ḥukūmah*—are cognates derived from the same root, *ḤKM*. In fact, they show that the single, multivalent term, *ḥukm*, brings together all three concepts: although used most frequently to connote "judgment," *ḥukm* also means "rule" and "wisdom."³²

But how does one become wise? Among the avenues that Ali recommends—for all people and especially for those who would lead—is learning from history, from the world around you, and, most importantly, from the example of God's prophets. Ali praises Muhammad as a true guide, and alongside Muhammad's hadith and the Qur'an, he holds up Moses, David, Solomon, and Jesus as exemplars of wisdom.³³ Ali himself was fully invested in teaching his followers, and his erudition was legendary even among his enemies. In speeches at Siffin, for example, even as they drew swords against Ali, Mu'awiyah's supporters were forced to admit that Ali was just, brave, pious, and wise.³⁴

COMPASSION AND GENTLENESS

Two connected virtues that Ali presents as drivers of justice are compassion and gentleness. He frequently urges his followers to be compassionate and gentle, in sayings like, "Gentle character is a sign of nobility," and, in an iteration of the Golden Rule, "How you wish to be treated should be the measure of how you treat others."³⁵ In particular, if we study Ali's instructions to his governors, we find that he frequently pairs injunctions to justice with directives to kindness. For example, in his appointment letter for his ward Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr as governor of Egypt, he enjoins him to be both kind and fair to the people, saying, "Lower your wing over them, offer them your softer side, show them your face, and give equal attention to all in glance and look."³⁶

Ali is uniformly described by the sources as a champion for the weak. While he encourages his governors to be kind and just to all, he urges them to be extra vigilant in protecting the rights of the poor. His famous and lengthy letter appointing his close associate Malik al-Ashtar as governor of Egypt includes a lengthy section on protecting the destitute, providing for their needs, and ensuring they get justice. Within this section, he writes:

Beware God's wrath and do not forsake the people of the lowest strata who have no other recourse—the poor, the needy. . . . Protect their rights for the sake of God, for He has entrusted them to you. . . . Appoint a special, trusted agent, a man who is godfearing and humble, to care for their needs. Have him bring you their concerns and respond to them in a manner that will earn you God's pardon on the day you meet Him. Of all your subjects, these are most in need of your justice.³⁷

Ali did not just preach justice for the disadvantaged; he also practiced it. As Dirar said of him, "The powerful did not dare presume upon a favorable ruling and the weak never despaired of his justice."³⁸

In yet another aspect of Ali's compassionate governance, we find he is especially forgiving of sins of fleshly temptation. In one famous saying, he declares, "If I saw a believer engaging in an immoral act, I would conceal him with this cloak that I am wearing."³⁹ On the other hand, he is severely unforgiving of transgressions committed by people in power, both his own officials and leaders of his opposition. In other words, while he is exceptionally benevolent in the face of sins of weakness, he is harshly intolerant of sins of strength.⁴⁰ He holds people in power to stringently high standards, presumably because the transgressions they commit in their capacity as leaders bring grief and pain to the community as a whole. He refuses to compromise with the powerful even though he knows the consequences will be dire, and we see this time and again. We see it in his flat-out refusal to renew Mu'awiyah's appointment as governor of Syria, which led to his rebellion and the Battle of Siffin. We see it in his refusal to grant the Medinese nobles Talhah and Zubayr higher stipends than the rest of the community, which led to their raising an army against him at the Battle of the Camel. We see it in his rebuke of his cousin and governor Ibn Abbas, who had used treasury funds for personal needs,⁴¹ which led to a falling out among Ali's own supporters. But yet again, when Ali has defeated his enemies and brought them to account, we see time and again that he simply pardons them. He pardons the remaining insurgents after the Battle of the Camel. He pardons the Kharijites who withdraw from the Battle of Nahrawan. In his last moments, after having been struck a death-blow, he even pardons his own murderer, the Kharijite Ibn Muljim.

INTEGRITY AND FREEDOM FROM CORRUPTION

The examples just cited of Talhah and Zubayr, and of Ibn Abbas, are about *amānah* (honesty, integrity), and this leads us to another pillar of Ali's

conception of justice: zero tolerance of corruption. It is reported that Ali would enter the treasury after the Friday prayer and declare, “O gold, O silver, tempt someone other than me!”⁴² Then he would distribute stipends and have the space swept to ensure that not a single coin remained. According to another report, Ali addressed the world saying, “I have divorced you thrice-over and there can be no reversal!”⁴³ A mob had killed Ali’s caliphal predecessor, Uthman, on charges of corruption and nepotism. Ali’s own views against corruption are even more stern due to this chronology. His emphasis on integrity is seen further in his repeated exhortations to governors to be scrupulous regarding state property, in accordance with the Qur’anic injunction, “God commands you to hand over the trusts with which you have been entrusted to their rightful owners.”⁴⁴

In yet another report, Ali’s own brother Aqil, who had a large family and many dependents, came asking for funds from the treasury. Not only did Ali refuse, but he brought a live firebrand close to Aqil’s body, and when Aqil screamed from pain and fear, Ali said to him, “Do you scream from a firebrand, while expecting me to give myself over to the flames of hell?”⁴⁵ These and many more anecdotes accompany the vast trove of Ali’s sermons strongly rejecting corruption and preaching a life of piety and virtue in this world in preparation for the eternal hereafter.⁴⁶

INCLUSION AND PLURALISM

A large proportion of the people in Ali’s realm were Christians and Jews. In Egypt the majority were Coptic Christians. Among Muslims a large proportion were not Ali’s particular Shia followers. Yet he made no distinction between these groups in terms of rights in the state, and his directions for just and kind government applied equally to all. All were accorded safety of life, honor, and property under Ali’s rule. On this issue, as with the others discussed in this chapter, Ali draws on Qur’anic teachings and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, who, in a famous hadith, declares, “All humans are children of God, and God loves best those who most benefit his children.”⁴⁷

In step with the prophet’s hadith and speaking to his own pluralist ideas, Ali is reported to have proclaimed: “If seated to rule, I would pass judgment among the people of the Torah from the Torah, among the people of the Gospel from the Gospel, and among the people of the Qur’an from the Qur’an. These judgments would shine forth in the presence of God Almighty, and they would exclaim to him: Lord, Ali has judged among your creatures with

your judgment.”⁴⁸ The lines are usually cited as a testament to Ali’s extraordinarily wide range of knowledge, but they also illustrate his broadminded governance.

It is important to remember that Ali preached his message of pluralism and inclusive justice from a position of power while he ruled one of the largest empires in the world. He could have taken a much different route, but he preached pluralism because he believed it to be the right thing to do. His story shows that, although he was not expecting to wave a magic wand and resolve all differences, he believed that we can and should learn to respect each other’s beliefs. Indeed, Ali had his own strong faith; in one text he says, “I have never doubted the truth ever since it was shown to me.”⁴⁹ Elsewhere, he declares, “Removing the veil of the body at death will not increase my conviction.”⁵⁰ But from this conviction sprang inclusiveness, openness, and tolerance. In a letter to his tax collectors, for example, Ali instructed them to extend their justice and compassion to all people in the realm, Muslims as well as people of other faiths, writing: “Do not come between a man and his needs. . . . Do not whip anyone for silver. Do not seize the property of a single individual, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jew.”⁵¹ In his earlier cited letter to Ashtar, Ali wrote: “Clothe your heart with compassion, love, and kindness toward your subject. Do not be like a ravening lion who devours their flesh, for people are of two kinds: they are either your brothers in faith or your peers in creation.”⁵²

CONCLUSION

Ali’s uncompromising position on just leadership is particularly interesting from someone who was simultaneously a religious leader, an ascetic, a caliph, and a military commander, someone who had charge of a far-flung empire and faced relentless rebellion and intrigue—thus, someone who was fully cognizant of the exigencies of realpolitik. Notwithstanding considerations of pragmatism, however, for Ali, leadership is evident only through the leader’s justice, in the holistic sense that I have discussed.

As a savant revered by Muslims of all denominations, Ali’s teachings can be a lodestar for just leadership in Muslim-majority countries, many of which are fiercely divided today. If these leaders were to take Ali’s teachings to heart, they would be conscious of their accountability to God and their responsibility to their people and govern all in their realm with fairness. My hope is that scholars of political thought and modern Middle Eastern history,

alongside leaders in education and politics, will build on this research to take that next step to bridge the gap on the ground.

As universal teachings of ethics, Ali's words transcend his time, place, and religious affiliation, and they embody the best values we all possess as humans. For leaders everywhere, Ali's teachings are a lofty vision for a just, rational, compassionate, principled, and pluralistic vision of governance that upholds the rights and looks after the needs of all in their domain. For, as Ali put it, "they are either your brothers in faith or your peers in creation."

NOTES

All translations in the article are my own. To balance accessibility with clarity, diacritical marks are omitted for names of people and places in the text of the narrative, but they are used for Arabic terms therein and for authors and titles in the notes.

1. Sermons, sayings, epistles, and some verses attributed to Ali have had enormous currency through the ages and are copiously represented in works of early Islamic history and literature. From these, they have been collected in tens of collections running into thousands of pages. Three major extant medieval compilations are al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, ed. and trans. Tahera Qutbuddin as *Nahj al-balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of 'Alī* (Leiden: Brill, 2024); al-Qāḍī l-Qudā'ī, *Dustūr ma'ālim al-ḥikam wa-ma'thūr makārim al-shiyam*, Jāhīz, *Mi'at kalimah*, both ed. and trans. Tahera Qutbuddin in a single volume as *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons, and Teachings of 'Alī, with the One Hundred Proverbs of al-Jāhīz* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Citations in this chapter are mostly from these sources.
2. There are numerous primary and secondary works on Ali's career and character in a large number of Islamic languages such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish. For a concise biography of Ali and further references, see Robert Gleave, "'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Devin J. Stewart (Brill online, 2008); and Tahera Qutbuddin, "'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 311, *Arabic Literary Culture, 500–925*, ed. Michael Cooperson and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2005), 68–76. Historical analyses of Ali's career and standing include Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muḥammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 141–310.
3. For an overview of Ali's oeuvre, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "Introduction," in Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*. It should be noted that, as collected oral materials, one cannot be certain in absolute terms of their attribution to Ali. However, many of the texts cited here have an early and wide provenance, and they also conform to the historical and literary context of Ali's time. For an overview of the early Islamic oration genre, including a detailed discussion of the orality and authenticity of these materials, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration: Art and Function* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
4. On the aesthetics of Ali's oration, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "Sermons of Ali: At the Confluence of the Core Islamic Teachings of the Qur'an and the Oral, Nature-Based Cultural Ethos of Seventh Century Arabia," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42, no. 1

- (2012): 201–28; and Tahera Qutbuddin, “A Sermon on Piety by Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Ṭālib: How the Rhythm of the Classical Arabic Oration Tacitly Persuaded,” in *Religion and Aesthetic Experience: Drama—Sermons—Literature*, ed. Sabine Dorpmüller, Jan Scholz, Max Stille, and Ines Weinrich (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, 2018), 109–24.
5. Cited widely, including al-Qāḍi l-Nu‘mān (Shia), *Sharḥ al-akhbār fī faḍā’il al-a’immah al-aṭḥār* (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1991), 1:89, 97; Tirmidhī (Sunni), *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. A. M. Shākir (Cairo: Muṣṭafā l-Bābi l-Ḥalabī), §3720, §3725, §3730, §3731; Ibn Sa’d (Sunni), *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. M. ‘A. ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1997), 3:16–18; Ibn Mājah (Sunni), *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, ed. M. N. al-Albānī (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma’ārif, 1997), §121: (أنا مدينة العلم وعلي بابها), (أنت يا علي أخي في الدنيا والآخرة).
 6. Or: “the best judge.” References include Nu‘mān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 1:91; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, §154: (أفضاكم علي).
 7. Citations include Qālī, *Kitāb al-Amālī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1926), 2:147; Nu‘mān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 2:391–92.
 8. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §4.3; Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.133: مات خزان الأموال وهم أحياء) (والعلماء باقون ما بقي الدهر أعيانهم مفقودة وأثارهم في القلوب موجودة).
 9. Several studies discuss the concept and practice of justice in Islam, and they draw on materials from the Qur’an and Hadith. See, e.g., Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom, Equality, and Justice in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002); Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Conception of Justice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Muntasir Mir, “Twelve Verses from the Qur’an,” in *Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Michael Iqgrave (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 27–31; and Khalid Abou El Fadl, “Qur’anic Ethics and Islamic Law,” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1 (2017): 7–28.
 10. For Sufi-oriented presentations of Ali’s justice, see Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam ‘Ali* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); M. Ali Lakhani, with Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Reza Shah-Kazemi, and Leonard Lewisohn, *The Sacred Foundations of Justice in Islam: The Teachings of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib* (Vancouver: World Wisdom and Sacred Web, 2006). For a comparison with Western systems of justice, see Ali Paya, “Imam ‘Ali’s Theory of Justice Revisited,” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 5–30. Studies on Ali’s justice in Middle Eastern and South Asian languages abound.
 11. For Ali’s injunctions to governors about these qualities, see Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, passim, esp. §2.53, known as “Ashtar’s testament.”
 12. Qur’an, Nahl 16:90: (إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ). Other Qur’an verses enjoining justice include Nisā’ 4:58, Nahl 16:76.
 13. Tahera Qutbuddin, “Piety and Virtue in Early Islam: Two Sermons by Imam Ali,” in *Self-Transcendence and Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, ed. Jennifer A. Frey and Candace Vogler (London: Routledge, 2019), 125–53.
 14. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.221: (والله لئن أبييت على حسك السعدان مسهّدًا وأجر في الأغلال مصفّدًا أحب إليّ من أن ألقى الله ورسوله ظالمًا لبعض العباد أو غاصبًا لشيء من الحطام).
 15. Qur’an, Kahf 18:87: (أَمَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نَعْتَبُهِ).
 16. Qur’an, Kahf 18:87: (أَمَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نَعْتَبُهِ). See, e.g., Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863–1893), s.v. “ẒLM”; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, ed. ‘A. ‘A. al-Kabir et al. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1985), s.v. “ẒLM”; al-Mu’ayyad fī l-Dīn

- al-Shirāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadyyyah*, vols. 1–4, ed. H. Hamid al-Din (Oxford and Mumbai: World of Islam Studies, 1975–2011), vol. 2, *majlis* §4.
17. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.198: “By God, Mu’awiyah is not more astute, but he deceives and sins. If not for my dislike of deceit, I would be the most cunning of people” (والله ما معاوية بأدهى مني ولكنه يغدر ويفجر ولولا كراهية الغدر لكنت من أدهى الناس); Ibn Shu’bah al-Ḥarrānī, *Tuhaf al-‘uqūl ‘an al-al-rasūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2007), 80: “If not for the dictates of piety, I would be the most cunning of the Arabs (لو لا التقى لكنت أدهى العرب) وقد أصبحنا في زمان قد آتخذ أكثر أهل الغدر كيساً ونسيبهم أهل (الجهل فيه إله حسن الحيلة ما لهم قاتلهم الله قد يرى الخول القلب وجه الحيلة ودونها مانع من أمر الله ونهيه فبعد رأي أي عين بعد القدرة عليها وينتجز فرصتها من لا حريجة له في الدين).
 18. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.41: (فبعد رأي أي عين بعد القدرة عليها وينتجز فرصتها من لا حريجة له في الدين).
 19. Raḍī, §3.2; Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §1.80: (العلم وراثته كريمة).
 20. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.33; Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §1.168: (أغنى الغنى العقل وأكبر: (الفقر الحمق).
 21. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.71; Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §1.128; Jāḥiz, *One Hundred Proverbs*, §61: (الحكمة ضالة المؤمن حيث وجدها ألحقها).
 22. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.65: (من نصب نفسه للناس إماماً فليبدأ بتعليم نفسه قبل تعليم غيره).
 23. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §6.2: (تبكي منه الدماء وتصرخ منه المواريث); Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.17: (تصرخ من جور قضائه الدماء وتعج منه المواريث).
 24. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §4.3; Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.133: (العلم حاكم والمال: العلم حاكم والمال: (إن ههنا لعلماً جماً), (محكوم عليه Knowledge protects you, whereas you have to protect wealth. Wealth decreases with spending, whereas knowledge increases with it.”
 25. See Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.53.
 26. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §1.124: (مرتبة الرجل بحسن عقله).
 27. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.323: (العلم علان مطبوع ومسموع ولا ينفع المسموع إذا لم يكن المطبوع).
 28. Raḍī, §3.88 (اعقلوا الخبر إذا سمعتموه عقل راعية لا عقل رواية فإن رواة العلم كثير ورعته قليل).
 29. Raḍī, §3.98 (رب عالم قتله جهله وعلمه معه لا ينفعه).
 30. Raḍī, §3.26; Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §5.14. For the text, translation, and analysis of this sermon, see Qutbuddin, “Piety and Virtue,” 128–35.
 31. Qur’an, Baqarah 2:269 (وَمَنْ يُؤْتَ الْحِكْمَةَ فَقَدْ أُوتِيَ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا).
 32. See, e.g., Lane, *Lexicon*; and Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān*, s.v. “ḤKM.”
 33. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §2.10.3. The Qur’an also praises these and other prophets for their wisdom, e.g., David (Qur’an, Ṣād 38:20), Moses (Qaṣaṣ 28:14), John the Baptist (Maryam 19:12).
 34. Such as the oration by Mu’awiyah’s general Dhu l-Kalā’ al-Himyari, cited in Naṣr ibn Muzāḥim al-Minqarī, *Waq’at Ṣiffīn*, ed. ‘A. M. Ḥārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1981), 240–41. See further references in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, 511 (oration §46.1), and discussion of the issue in Qutbuddin, *Arabic Oration*, 305–7.
 35. Quḍā’ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §1.115: (من الكرم لين الشيم), and §4.1.9: (اجعل نفسك ميزاناً). This counsel is similar to the Biblical dictum “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12); and the Confucian rule “Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself.”
 36. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.27.1: (فأخض لهم جناحك وألن لهم جانبك وأبسط لهم وجهك وأس بينهم في: (الحظلة والنظرة).
 37. Raḍī, §2.53.14: (ثم الله الله في الطبقة السفلى من الذين لا حيلة لهم والمساكين والمحتاجين . . . وأحفظ الله: (فيهم بالإعذار إلى الله تعالى يوم تلاقه فإن هؤلاء من بين الرعية أحوج إلى الإنصاف من غيرهم ما أستحفظك من حقهم . . . ففرغ لأرلنك تفكك من أهل الخشية والتواضع فليرفع إليك أمورهم ثم أعمل).

- oration §37: “The weak are mighty in my eyes, as I strive to restore their rights. The mighty are weak in my eyes, as I strive to wrest those rights from them” (الذليل عندي عزيز حتى أخذ الحق له والقوي عندي ضعيف حتى أخذ الحق منه).
38. Citations include Qālī, *Kitāb al-Amālī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1926), 2:147; Nu‘mān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 2:391–92.
 39. Ismā‘īl ibn Mūsā ibn Ja‘far al-Šādiq, *al-Ja‘fariyyāt* (also titled *al-Ash‘athiyyāt*), ed. M. Š. al-Muzaḥḥar (Karbalā: al-‘Atabah al-Ḥusayniyyah Qism al-Shu‘ūn al-Thaqāfiyyah, 2013), 2: 258, §1606: (لو وجدت مؤمناً على فاحشة لسنرتة بثوبي).
 40. I thank my sister Dr. Bazat-Saifiyah Qutbuddin for this insight.
 41. Ya‘qūbī, *Tārīkh al-Ya‘qūbī* (Beirut: Dār Šādir, 1960), 2: 205. Note that the issue is complicated by Ibn Abbas’s thinking he was entitled to a share from the Qur’anic *khums* (fifth) share, allocated from the public treasury to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. After Ali’s rebuke, Ibn Abbas returned the money he had taken.
 42. Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, ed. A. Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 1965), 1.22: (يا صفراء ويا بيضاء غري غري).
 43. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.69: (طلعتك ثلاثاً).
 44. Qur’an, Nisā’ 4:58: (إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا). Further instructions by Ali to his governors enjoining *amānah* include Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.5, 2.26, 2.40, 2.41, 2.53.
 45. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §1.221. Sadly, Aqil went over to Mu‘awiyah to ask for money; however, he regretted his act almost immediately and returned to Ali without accepting Mu‘awiyah’s largesse (Nu‘mān, *Sharḥ al-akhbār*, 2: 100–102).
 46. For an analysis of Ali’s overarching theme of the hereafter, see Tahera Qutbuddin, “‘Ali’s Contemplations on this World and the Hereafter in the Context of His Life and Times,” in *Essays in Islamic Philology, History, and Philosophy*, ed. A. Korangy, Wheeler M. Thackston, Roy P. Mottahedeh, and William Granara (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 333–53; see also Ali’s instructions to his governor Uthman ibn Hunayf rebuking him for pandering to the rich (Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.45); and his rebuke to his judge Shurayh for purchasing a large house (Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.3; Quḍā‘ī, *A Treasury of Virtues*, §7.7).
 47. Al-Qaḍī l-Quḍā‘ī, *Light in the Heavens: Sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad* (*Kitāb al-Shihāb*), ed. and trans. Tahera Qutbuddin (New York: New York University Press, 2016), §9.54: (الخلق عيال الله وأحب الخلق إلى الله أنفعهم لعياله).
 48. Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 20:283: (لو كسرت لي الوسادة لحكمت بين أهل التوراة بتوراتهم وبين أهل الإنجيل بإنجيلهم وبين أهل الفرقان بفرقانهم حتى تزه تلك القضايا إلى الله عز وجل النوراة بتوراتهم وبين أهل الإنجيل بإنجيلهم وبين أهل الفرقان بفرقانهم حتى تزه تلك القضايا إلى الله عز وجل). Cited after Madā‘inī, in Ibn Abī l-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-balāghah*, 2:136, with a variant ending. The word used in the quote to denote the Qur’an is *Furqān* (lit., Demarcator), one of its several names.
 49. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §3.168: (ما شككت في الحق مذ أريته).
 50. Jāhīz, *One Hundred Proverbs*, §1: (لو كثف الغطاء مازددت يقيناً).
 51. Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāghah*, §2.51: (ولا تحسبوا أحداً عن حاجته ولا تحسبوه عن طلبته . . . ولا تضربن). (أحداً سوطاً لمكان درهم ولا تمسن مال أحد من الناس مصل ولا معاهد وأشعر قلبك الرحمة للرعية والمحبة لهم واللطف بهم ولا تكونن عليهم سبغاً ضارياً تعتتم).
 52. Raḍī, §2.53.3: (أكلهم فأنهم صنفان إما أخ لك في الدين وإما نظير لك في الخلق). With slightly different phrasing in Nu‘mān, *Da‘ā’im al-Islām*, 1: 354. UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan quoted these lines in his address at Tehran University in 1997 (Press Release SG/SM/6419 OBV/34 at www.un.org/press/en/1997/19971209.SGSM6419.html).